

Reply to Roberts's Critique

By Alastair Hannay

In his 'Critique' of my interpretation of *Philosophical Fragments* Dr. Roberts accuses me of presenting an 'outrageous' picture of Kierkegaard.¹ He thinks I would have done better to attend more to the 'literary context' in which the pseudonymous author makes his claims in that work. And in general Roberts regards the attempt in my *Kierkegaard* to read Kierkegaard in the light of the philosophical tradition as seriously misguided.² Having a high regard for Dr. Roberts's own writings I was prepared to find that his arguments proved me wrong about Kierkegaard. But on examining them I find they give no support at all to his charge of distortion. Of course that in itself doesn't make me right. But I think a review of Roberts's arguments and evidence will show not only that his criticism is not well enough grounded, but that if the grounds he offers are rightly construed, the picture of Kierkegaard they support is mine.

Misconstrual of the first piece of evidence is not Roberts's own fault, but that of the Swenson-Lowrie translation. Roberts claims I am wrong to think of the eternal in connection with the incarnation as timelessness, rather than something that would allow God a 'successive aspect' and thus let the absolute paradox 'remain paradoxical in some looser sense' than that of a logical contradiction. In support he cites a *Postscript* passage which indicates that the 'absolute difference' between man and God is not such that successiveness is put on one side and God on the other, for on the one hand successiveness is not denied of God while on the other 'Climacus straightforwardly admits that man is eternal'. This is indeed just what the Swenson-Lowrie translation leads one to suppose. It says:

But the absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being (which is just as much true of the most gifted human being as it is of the most stupid), whose essential task cannot be to think *sub specie aeterni*, since as long as he exists he is, though eternal, essentially an existing individual, whose essential task it is to concentrate upon inwardness in existing; while God is infinite and eternal. (CUP 195)

The original (3rd. ed.), however, is as follows:

Men den absolute Forskjel mellem Gud og Menneske er netop den at Mennesket er et enkelt eksisterende Væsen (og dette er det bedste Hoved ligesaa fuldt som den Dummeste), hvis væsentlige Opgave derfor ikke kan være at tænke *sub specie aeterni*, da han selv, vel evig, dog saa længe han eksisterer væsentlig er Eksisterende, og det Væsentlige for ham derfor maa være Inderlighed i Eksistensen; Gud derimod den Uendelige, der er evig. (SV 9, 181)

Note that 'vel evig' ('though no doubt eternal') comes before the contrasting clause beginning 'dog saa længe han eksisterer' ('nevertheless so long as he exists'). That is, being eternal is set in opposition to whatever is true of the individual *qua* existing, not included in the latter as the translation has it. Note also that where the translation simply places 'eternal' alongside 'infinite' as though both were, independently of each other, properties of God, the original makes 'eternal' a defining property of God *qua* infinite. Thus where the translation misleadingly lets the eye pick out 'infinite' as what distinguishes God from man here, leaving 'eternal' a property common to both, Kierkegaard's text clearly inclines one to understand the eternity of God as what distinguishes God *qua* infinite from man *qua* existent. In any case I think Climacus's repeated insistence in the *Postscript* on the separation, in fact incongruency, of existence and eternity should have led Roberts to suspect the passage he cites of being anomalous rather than representative. The paradoxical religiousness, which corresponds to the B-position in *Fragments*, is explicitly defined as setting up existence and the eternal as 'absolute' contradictories (CUP 506; SV 10, 237).

One may wonder what it means to describe man as eternal, or indeed as anything, outside existence. But answers compatible with the incongruency view of existence and eternity are available. After all, the idea of faith, which for Climacus belongs exclusively to the paradoxical religiousness, can be described schematically as a conviction that one's existence is anchored in a dimension outside time and change, and it is to the 'deepening' of the individual's 'existence in faith' (cf. *Papirer* X,6 B 111, pp. 137-8) that Climacus's writings address themselves. So, from the point of view of the faith in which Climacus would have his readers deepen themselves, it would be natural enough for him to concede that man is, after all, 'no doubt eternal'. And just as natural for him to say this in a casual aside, for it is the attitude of the existing individual *to* this idea that matters for him, not the concession itself.

Before remarking on the 'literary context', let me draw attention to a peculiar feature of Roberts's argument. Commenting on my accepting at its face value Climacus's assertion that God (or 'the' God) is absolutely unknowable, Roberts argues that 'it is highly unlikely that Kierkegaard believed that according to the B-position there is no knowledge of the eternal'. (The premiss of Roberts's argument is something I will return to in a moment.) But the B-position, here specified by Roberts as religious-

ness B, is defined as being based on something ‘inaccessible to thought’ and which can only be formulated in a ‘play with words’ (*Leg med Ord*) (SV 10, 245; cf. CUP 513). The idea that ‘that which according to its own nature is eternal comes into existence, is born, grows up, and dies’, says Climacus, ‘is a breach with all thinking’ (ibid.). In other words, and *without* playing with them, it is not an idea that we can logically reconstruct. In any ordinary sense of ‘knowledge’, then, it is not something we could ever come to know. Now religiousness B is, if anything is, a Climacian construction; it does not occur in Kierkegaard’s writings outside the concepts in which Climacus clothes it. So any reason for saying that Kierkegaard believed there *is* knowledge of the eternal is a reason for saying he believed religiousness B to give a false account of Christianity. If, following the line Roberts advocates for words like ‘eternal’ and ‘infinite’, we were to accuse Climacus (as Roberts accuses me) of forcing logical distinctions onto theological ones, thus making the incarnation look more unthinkable than it is, we would be saying that religiousness B is a caricature of the true position, not that in spite of what Climacus says religiousness B does accommodate knowledge of the eternal.

Now on certain conditions one might grant that religiousness B did contain such knowledge, and if it is on these that Roberts bases his claim I have no substantial quarrel with him. If, in the case of the eternal at least, we do not require, as epistemologists traditionally do, that the belief component of one’s knowledge be not only true (as Climacus presupposes in the case of the eternal) but also rationally justifiable, there is ample evidence throughout Kierkegaard’s works of his admitting such ‘knowledge’. But that is also true of Climacus. *Fragments* itself asks us to think of faith as an ‘organ’, and though Climacus is careful to say that faith is not a kind of knowledge (*Erkjendelse*) (SV 6, 58; cf. F 76), he does say that it gives you an understanding of the eternal, or that it is the ‘condition’ for such understanding. If we adopt a looser way of talking than Climacus allows us, letting this count as knowledge, then no one will dispute that religiousness B contains knowledge of the eternal. But then this ‘knowledge’ is still subject to Climacus’s reminder that,

consequences founded on a paradox are humanly speaking built over a yawning chasm, and [that] their total content, which can be transmitted to the individual only with the express understanding that they rest upon a paradox [is] not to be appropriated as a settled estate, for their entire value trembles in the balance. (F 123, Hong tr.; SV 6, 88-89).

The fact that one’s conviction that the consequences are true can be sustained only against reason means that one cannot know, in any *strict* sense, that the ‘total content’ corresponds to any truth. But if, as Climacus assumes, the belief in an historical eternal event is a true belief (as from God’s point of view outside existence it can be), then a belief in

its truth might reasonably be said to be the ‘condition’ of the eternal’s having access to human understanding. Climacus’s answer to his own opening question as to whether the truth can be learned is that it can, but only if we attune ourselves in faith against reason to receive it. The truth can be learned if there is such a truth and it ‘wants’ to be grasped. So, provided there is a God, the paradox of the incarnation does not imply ‘total darkness about God’, as Roberts takes my account to imply. Nor, therefore, in terms of a putative grasp of the eternal’s intention, does my account imply any such discontinuity between religiousness A and religiousness B as would make it ‘hard to see what the point would be . . . in spending much energy expounding religiousness A’.

But now to Climacus’s relation to Kierkegaard. Dr. Roberts rightly wishes I had said more about what I thought was implied by reminding the reader that the assertion that ‘the God merely signifies for us that [the Unknown] is unknown’ (F 55; SV 6, 44) is a pseudonym’s. In fact, having begun my sentence by saying ‘Kierkegaard says . . .’, I felt it necessary to distinguish the epistemological kind of assertion made here about ‘deity’ being just a name for what reason cannot grasp, and the kinds of statements Kierkegaard makes in other contexts and which, undeniably, appear incompatible with it. But there is more than one way of interpreting such incompatibilities. Roberts makes it look as though the conclusion that the God is unknowable is arrived at by wrongly linking the idea of God, who should be knowable, to reason’s ‘paradoxical desire to know the unknowable’. If only one doesn’t put these two together one leaves open the possibility that God can be – or already is – known in some other way. On this view Climacus would be making inferences from premisses that Kierkegaard himself would not accept, perhaps in order to make cautionary examples of the Hegelians, who believe that if you think the ‘unthinkable’ hard enough it will eventually become thinkable. Roberts doesn’t spell this out, suggesting only that something like this is correct, in order to illustrate his main point that the conclusion ‘is embedded in a highly artificial and humorous context’ and ‘ought not to be taken in a doctrinaire way’.

Well, Climacus is certainly a humorist, a self-styled one at that (see CUP 545; SV 10, 278). But does this mean we are not to take what he says seriously? From everything Kierkegaard writes in connection with, or in the guise of, Climacus, the limitation of ‘humour’ is not that the insights it affords are false, but that the activity of coming by them is very different from putting them into effect.

The humorist constantly . . . sets the God-idea into conjunction with other things and evokes the contradiction – but he does not maintain a relationship to God in terms of religious passion *stricto sic dictus*, he transforms himself instead into a jesting and yet profound exchange-center for all these transactions, but he does not himself stand related to God. The religious man does the same, he sets the God-idea into

juxtaposition with everything *and sees the contradiction*, but in his inmost consciousness he is related to God. [While an] immediate religiosity rests in the pious superstition that it can see God directly in everything. (CUP 451, Swenson-Lowrie tr.; SV 10, 182. Latter emphases added)

On Roberts's view, the conclusions Climacus draws must either be false, making him into something like a sophist deliberately brought to life to spread confusion and doubt among the Hegelians, or true but irrelevant for knowledge of God. Kierkegaard's relation to his pseudonyms is then that of a puppet-player, or general. I believe this view of Kierkegaard as manipulator or strategist to be fundamentally mistaken. Kierkegaard lives in and through his pseudonyms, though identifying himself with no one of them. In Climacus he reaches the peak of his own intellectual insight into the problems confronting him, '[carrying] the problems decisively to their extreme [*afgjørende paa Spidse*] by the strain of the qualitative dialectic' (*Papirer* VII, 2 B 235, pp. 81-82). 'At sætte/bringe paa Spidsen' need mean no more than 'accentuate', 'bring into relief', or 'carry to its logical extreme', not 'exaggerate' as those favouring Roberts's kind of interpretation sometimes claim. Thus I see no reason at all to take Climacus's conclusions with a pinch of salt, except of course where he himself says we should (as in the 'impudent invention' of Christianity, mentioned by Roberts, but also his resort to 'poetic' imagery to 'quicken the mind to an apprehension of the divine' (*opvække Sindet til at forstaae det Guddommelige*) (F 32, Hong tr.; SV 6, 28).

Nor is Climacus's own insistence that he is not to be read in a 'doctrinizing' (*docerende*) way such a simple message that we can conclude without further ado that we are not to take his assertions seriously. In defending his pseudonym against remarks in an article by Prof. R. Nielsen, Kierkegaard says his critic has failed to grasp two things: first that the work in question (*De omnibus dubitandum est*) 'has a far deeper meaning than the single theses [Climacus] has had printed'; and second, that Johannes Climacus has used the method of double communication which allows him to present Christianity as an 'existence communication' and not a doctrine (*Papirer* X,6 B 111, p. 137). As Kierkegaard says in another context, this means that the conclusions are to be related to the individual's relationship to the 'teacher' – who of course is not Climacus but the God in time. The point is not that Climacus's conclusions are inaccurate, exaggerated, or even a scaffolding to throw away after use, but that they are one-sided and that if they are to do their job (deepen the individual's existence in faith) they are not to be taken as pieces of 'direct paragraph- and professor-communication' (SV 16, 121), but as components in the personal 'how' of one's faith in that 'teacher' whose relationship to the 'learner' *Fragments* lays analytically bare. As such components, however, they are to remain intact, retain their face value, on pain of a relapse into 'pious superstition' or

(considering one has left immediate religiosity behind) worse. In the *Book on Adler* Kierkegaard commends the 'busy' Climacus for 'tracking down every illusion, snaring every paralogism, detaining every treacherous turn of phrase', all in the service of 'clearing the terrain' and getting rid of the 'confusion' of the '1800 years' (*Papirer* VII,2 B 235, p. 81). In yet another comment Kierkegaard remarks that 'the absurd is the negative criterion for what is higher than human understanding and knowledge', and stresses the difference between 'belief on the strength of the absurd' (Johannes *de silentio*) and 'belief of the absurd itself' (Johannes Climacus) (*Papirer* X,6 B 80, p. 87). It would be strange if, in the light of these and many similar assertions from Kierkegaard's unpseudonymous pen, Kierkegaard really meant that Climacus's conclusion that the God is unknowable was false.

One final piece of evidence Roberts draws on in support of his criticism is the footnote omitted from the printed version of *Fragments*, and which, among other things, says there has never been an atheist though many have been unwilling to let 'what they knew', namely that 'the God exists', get a hold of their minds (*Journal and Papers* III, 3606, Hong tr.; *Papirer* V, B 40,11, p. 92). The footnote actually printed merely comments on the absurdity of trying to get people to believe in God's existence by confronting them with a proof, saying simply 'what a fine topic for lunatic comedy!' (SV 6, p. 43; F 54). As a case in point the excised material mentions Holberg's newly graduated master of the *Disputats*, Erasmus Montanus, who on returning to his village home in short order makes his proud mother fear she has become a stone and the deacon turn into a rooster. Kierkegaard frequently uses footnotes to supplement or throw light on a point in the main text through literary allusion, often in a more 'direct' and didactic style than in the main text itself, and it isn't difficult to imagine the illumination going wrong and proving inapposite in some way. In the present case there is a blatant discrepancy between the main text and the 'illumination'. In order to show the absurdity of trying to establish a belief in God's existence by a proof, Kierkegaard wants to say something like 'there is from the beginning a deep-down conviction that God exists, that death is not the end, etc. even if it is not properly understood', and that without it the proof would never do the job, while with it the proof would be redundant. But the omitted note points out that questions of God's existence and of one's immortality are (at least as far as knowledge is concerned) 'problems of immanence', for which 'recollection holds true' (*ibid.*). This is part of the A-position, and in a metaphysical discussion of the absolute paradox, acceptance of which (as the *Postscript* explicitly states) involves a 'breach with immanence' (SV 10, 238; CUP 506), it would be altogether inappropriate to include a footnote based on the assumption (as Climacus earlier puts it) that 'self-knowledge is a knowledge of God' (SV 6, 17; F 14). Whether there has ever been an atheist or not is a question of what people fundamentally, and even unconsciously or at least nonexplicitly,

believe. If it is true that there has never been an atheist, then that truth applies as much to the B- as to the A-position, except that in the former the belief will be explicit and it will be explicitly a *belief*, a matter of faith, not knowledge. Recollection is not an epistemological resource in the B-position. Indeed, in order to become the 'new creature in creation' that is a Christian one must lack every 'vestige of immanence' (SV 10, 242; CUP 510). This and other remarks of Climacus's lead me to question Roberts's use of the omitted footnote to establish that for Climacus everyone has a knowledge of God, and thus to resist his attempt to force me to conclude, from this and my own claim that there is no knowledge of the eternal in the B-position, that religiousness B is false. (Dr. Roberts uses the anomalousness of this result to infer the extreme unlikelihood of Kierkegaard's believing there is no knowledge of the eternal in the B-position.)

Finally, a comment on Dr. Roberts's diagnosis of my 'distortion' of the paradox. He says: 'rather than read Kierkegaard in the light of the philosophical tradition, a more fruitful strategy for interpreting him might be to re-interpret the philosophical vocabulary in terms of the Christian tradition'. But in the frame of my own 'valiant' attempt such central concepts as 'eternity' and 'infinity' (and not least 'spirit')³ are already thoroughly imbued with Christian connotations; not just because in Hegel the Christian and the philosophical tradition are deliberately integrated, though for Kierkegaard in a way that corrupts the Christian content, but also, prior to that, in terms of what the philosophical tradition already owes to Christian thinkers. What Kierkegaard does is convert the newly theocentric version of the philosophical vocabulary (that of the Hegelian version of the Socratic, A-position of *Fragments*) into an anthropocentrically Christianized one (in structure that of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness). He gives the central terms forward-looking uses, in terms of the needs of the individual heart and conscience, in place of their use to refer back to an established blueprint of an eternal order waiting only to be translated into practice. This, surely, is of interest to everyone, and not just to 'a few Christians and other marginal people who are seeking to make something of themselves'. To understand this reorientation it is just as surely imperative to read Kierkegaard in the light of the philosophical tradition.

I regard the idea of Kierkegaard being a support just for 'marginal' people with some suspicion. One understands why *they* should be interested in Kierkegaard, but, particularly if they call themselves Christians, isn't there something in the thought that *Kierkegaard* would have his own special interest in them? In a footnote referred to by Roberts, Climacus (or for that matter Kierkegaard) talks of alienating people from the 'knowledge' they appear to themselves to possess so as to give them the opportunity to 'assimilate' it in the inwardness of faith (SV 9, 231 fn.; CUP 245 fn.). That, as I understand Kierkegaard, means retaining the propositional content (what one might believe if one's belief

had the form of acceptance of a doctrine) against the realization that the idea of its source is absolutely paradoxical, a realization that now prevents the belief having the form of acceptance of a doctrine. Where the 'knowledge' is *of* the incarnation itself, i.e. of the source of eternal understanding, then there is strictly no propositional content to retain, for the incarnation is the circumstance that is said to be absolutely paradoxical. Besides, the idea that only marginals are trying to make something of themselves (presumably Dr. Roberts means in ways we should associate with becoming Christians) reeks ominously of the 'sectarian knight of faith', that paid-up outsider who 'leaps off the narrow path of the paradox in order to become a tragic hero on the cheap' (*F&T*, 106, Hannay tr.;⁴ SV 5, 73). The paradox here is of course not Climacus's, but Silentio's, acceptance of which puts you out of reach of normal ethical discourse but without committing you to anything-like logical contradiction. The sectarian thinks you must be a person of a certain type to accept the paradox and that an ethical subculture can be formed of persons of that type, the predispositionally well-adjusted, because otherwise maladjusted, inhabitants of the periphery.

My comments have not directly touched the question of whether the notion of the eternal in connection with the incarnation in *Fragments* can be that of timelessness. But I think they go some way to rebutting Roberts's accusation that the picture I present of Kierkegaard's views, in and out of *Fragments*, is 'outrageous'. Or rather, if Dr. Roberts is outraged, my remarks seem to me to suggest that it is not my picture of Kierkegaard that should outrage him, but Kierkegaard himself.

1. Robert C. Roberts, 'A Critique of Alastair Hannay's Interpretation of the *Philosophical Fragments*', *Kierkegaardiana* XIII (1984), pp. 149-154.

2. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard, The Arguments of the Philosophers*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982, esp. Ch. 4.

3. See my 'Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark Revisited', *Inquiry* 28 (1985), No. 3.

4. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. with intro. by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985.